To Rose
Acknowledgment

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THIS BOOK CONTAINS:

Early Wisdom 11
The Eaves Are Full of the Crying 12
The Flame 13
Strange Vigil 14
The Cry of Man 15
To the Secret Poets 16
Rainy Night 17
The Mirror 18
Ownership 19
To An Adversary 20
The Old Man 21
Spring Song 22
The Actor 23
After Counting Ten 24
For Failure 25
Even As David 26
Love Is A Word 27
To a Grapefruit 28
To the Sisters of St. Michael's 29
The Traveller 30
Poetry 31
Faith 32
The Teacher 33
Lament For Columbine 34
Foreboding 35
Race Track 36
I Tell You, Truth 37
Frail Warrior 38
Elegy 39
As a Flower 40
Street Scene 41
Mark 42
Country Walks 43
New England Apple Tree 44
The Cigarette Girl 45
EARLY WISDOM

I used to dress in overalls and play
Along the brook that sang beside our house,
Or, chastened by its song, sit on our lawn
And wait for passersby. I never spoke
Until my stern New England neighbors hailed.
Perhaps I looked as if I wanted them
To speak to me, because they often did.
One day a carriage stopped and when I smiled
At her a lovely lady called me dear
And asked me where I left my shoes as though
She thought it Sunday, so I guessed, or cold
Outside. She patted down my hair, then kissed
My unwashed cheek and left. I often prayed
That she would one day pass our farmhouse door.
Although I scrubbed my cheek and combed my hair,
She never came again. I thought it strange.
THE EAVES ARE FULL OF THE CRYING

He does not need you now that wine and bread
Are not as dear to him as they were then.
He does not need you now; young Chatterton is dead.
My cautious world, you do not love young men
Who work, and dream, and feed a little flame—
Unless, of course, it whips them into fame.

Your gates may be flung back on some cold night
When thin men bend before the driving snow,
And there may be your warmth and candlelight,
But Chatterton is gone and will not know.
So shrug your well-bred shoulders listlessly,
And ask about a wild bird’s pedigree.

He does not need you now; he is serene
And does not ask if you are flesh or stone,
Or why you crushed his heart at seventeen.
Be still; in death the dead are dead, alone.
How futile, world, to bless the printed page
And thunder praises to an empty stage!

THE FLAME

The flame I tend, a hungry wolf, has drawn
Its scant cloak of grey around its throat
And waits. I had this whelp since it was born;
I held it close and heard its first sharp note,
And now it lies upon the hearth to wait.
Red eyes half shut, but still all set to spring
At food with hot, red mouth never too late
To close on all a friendly hand may bring.
I call to mind the prideful Spartan lad
Who hid the stolen fox beneath his blouse
And was devoured to keep the code he had;
So I deny what I keep in my house.
One day in answer to the primal law
The starving wolf will turn that hungry jaw.
STRANGE VIGIL

I do not know just why I stand on guard
Before the entrance of my secret shrine.
As surely as the soul outlives the shard
No mortal man will give the countersign,
And when these outworn arms are rust,
When no one guards the way I stand before,
And when this watchman coldly sinks to dust,
There will remain no priest, no guarded door.
It is quite strange to wait out here so long,
To watch the village lights where good men live,
To catch the faintest trace of lovely song,
And stay to see a sign no man will give.
As long as life is long and dreams are bright
A shrine must have a priest and vigil light.

THE CRY

I have seen the word "peace" torn from the bruised lips
Of the agonized, as battered flower petals in a tempest.
Since lips have formed words, that has been the cry
With the crumbling worlds and the little people
Who have said they wanted to lift their hearts to the stars,
To breathe the quiet air as God's equal children.
I too have raised the cry from bloody lips,
Have screamed that word in the face of oblivion.
I have said, "Peace!"
And echoed from all the valleys of the troubled people
That word has thundered back, "Let us have peace!"
But after that I lived to face the day of peace in a great world
Where each man hailed the other brother.
And the cry of the little people was no more,
But in the homes of the families that had trembled together
United as one to face the foe
I saw the men, unable to bear the quiet, turn on the women
like tigers,
And the women turn on the men with bared claws.
So I have said, finally, not in a nation alone is the enemy
war and anguish
But in the tempest in men's hearts.
I shall ever weep down the years in search of peace.
TO THE SECRET POETS

Young men of words all stiff like rotten wood,
You young who hide your song beneath a code
To be, perhaps, not clearly understood
Have scoffed because I bear the poet's load
Of cadenced song, and tell so simply what I tell.
Ignore the heart's own rhythm then, you young.
Who say he wins who says it first, not well;
I say he lives whose songs are one day sung.
Then, let the whole world know the thing I say;
Yes, let it know I love, and love the spring,
And love the secret night and smiling day.
And silver-fountained words that sing, that sing.
So build a nest, young men, and build a wall;
No one will find you out, no one at all.

RAIN IS FOR MEMORY

The long, wet fingers of the night unloosed
The tangled threads of all the flighted years
With such insistent care I leave the house,
A target for the rain's swift slanted spears.
On nights like these, but oh so long ago
I hurried by those dim-lit streets with books
My coat protected from the rain and snow
And reached my home as eager as I was to go.

My mind tells me the time I passed this way
Was not last night or even last year's night,
But in the falling of the same wet rain
I cannot feel I was so long away,
That wars were fought since then and maps were changed
After I fretted at the lagging day
And stored within my mind the things to say.

I know the way to climb the winding stair
Up three long flights to where a poet lives
And when I reach the door I knock my knock
And listen to the empty sound it gives.
I know his unlocked door, his trustful sign
That what he has no thief will want.
I do not know the why we spilt the wine,
Or how, but own at last the fault was mine.
THE MIRROR

All through the winding street I go
In search of one I do not know.
There is no clue until I pass
The looking glass.

I seek him in the dim church light,
Beneath the wind-blown stars at night;
But only through the looking glass
His features pass.

Not where the forests' small winds blow,
Or where the sad-eyed poets go,
Is there the faintest sign or trace
Of that strange face.

I see for just a moment in the looking glass
The shadow of my soul, and I too pass.

OWNERSHIP

No man has ever owned a plot of land,
Despite his deeds and legal scraps;
The patient earth eludes the greedy hand.
And lets time rot its careful maps.

The earth owns him instead and calmly waits
Until his little bags of minutes burst
To spill across the ground his feeble dates
And quench at last his dusty thirst.
TO AN ADVERSARY

Think not to crush my spirit with this blow,
For I have paid a debt beneath sun rays
That made an ocean dry, where shade men know
Came only from a pick raised high in days
Of sweat and toil when water came in sips
And could not wet the dust that stole my breath,
That could not ease my parched, cracked lips;
But still I cheated that which sought my death.
So do not come with cunning ways to split
My dreams in little chips, to smash my light
And so blind me; for just the tiny bit
Of memory I keep is worth the fight.
Then draw your sword and drive in far
Or I shall crawl and smite you with a star.

THE OLD MAN

He sits all day in the sun warming himself,
Stirring the chilled blood that once sang lustily,
But now the cold is coming on
For he is old.
All summer long he sat like this,
Wearing clothes that would fit a man twice his weight,
Seeing nothing--
Not even the hills
Or the rock on the village green.
Townsmen still tell their sons about the rock
And the man who carried it to the green
When he was young,
About the giant blacksmith who broke his back
Across the stone
And how, since then, no one has tried his strength.
So fame still sits with the gaunt old man
Soaking in the sun,
And small boys gaze;
But yesterday's strong man sees nothing,
And remembers only that he is old
And cold.

An unseen Indian creeps
Across the sleeping New England town,
Staining the trees with vivid paints
And the hills with flame and sullen gold.
The leaves begin to fall, bleeding.
The old man shivers now in the frosted air
And gazes towards the hills,
Seeing...smelling...fall.
And if the women folk do not see him leave the yard,
He thinks he will take a walk.
SPRING SONG

At dawn I find the earth is still in death
Beneath a lacy shroud of virgin snow,
And all the trees are white with winter's breath
And all their servile limbs are drooping low.
Across a field of cold white violets
I leave my tracks like some lost pilgrim's trail,
Across a fragrant land where chill snow sets
'Tis this stiff example of revolts that fail.
Because on yesterday my heart was full of spring
And little boats of happiness were in its streams
I turn and hurry back lest winter bring
Disaster to my verdant springtime dreams.
I wait the One who rules the seasons' hours
To set aright this crime of snow-white flowers.

THE ACTOR

The day he shot himself quite dead
They said he broke his heart
And closed the curtains of his eyes
To play the last grand part.

I saw him play at make believe
And know he never knew
A way he might reverse his art
To make the truth untrue.
AFTER COUNTING TEN

I did not want to utter angry words,
To scatter them about your fields, my friend,
Like poisoned grain to end the song of birds
And in the desolation gain my end;
But I would set them down upon a sheet
That you might take them in your steady hand
Like some exotic city girl the wheat,
The soul and sacrament of our good land.
You did not like the aged poet's verse
Just from the tenement and mean street strife;
But more, you did not like the city's curse,
The marks upon his face of that sad life.
You saw each line that told where sin began;
I saw the resurrection of a man.

FOR FAILURE

I mind the most
Not taunts or back-turned friend;
But dreams that will not fade or have
An end.

It is not bad
To have a falling star.
And so forget the dream that leads
Afar.
EVEN AS DAVID

The dread that waits my coming is a foe
More deadly than the coiled still snakes that wait
With rapier, with poisoned fangs, I know,
More cunning than the stalking wolves of fate.
I pause within the lighted room to note
The way my hands wore smooth and left the years
Upon the things I touched and in my throat
I feel the telegraph of my heart's tears.
Not much is there to see, not much to mark;
And hold against the crushing phantom here;
But this is part of me to break the dark,
An antidote against the venom of my fear.
Before I go I take for me a song to sing
And for the waiting foe a stone and sling.

LOVE IS A WORD

I have been to the Metropolitan flower shows,
A flower-lover in rags viewing the orchids
Safely away from my hungry fingers,
Safely behind glass.
Life has been to me a series of glass cases.

Once there was a girl
And if I could have said the word,
If only I could have said the right word . . .
But she was safely behind her glass case,
Safely furred in sable, safe from my poor word.
Love is a word.

And I have stood behind the glass doors of industry
Quietly asking to exchange my hands, my eyes
For a little bread, a little wine, a rain-fast roof;
But the executives were behind their glass cases
And could not hear my word.
Love is a word.

I wander this fertile land
That holds so lightly the fact of my birth
With only the deed to a fistful of dust
And in the years and years this dust will drift in the wind
Gently beating on the cases, the air-tight cases
That might have opened for a word.
Love is a word.
TO A GRAPEFRUIT

May those who find my heart-made songs
Upon a dusty shelf
Be glad as I was glad
Myself
The day I walked a bright Miami street
And found your universe beneath my feet.

May hands that open up my heart
Before they hurry by
Be gentle with their touch
As I
And may the arteries of song then be
As much a source of life as you to me.

TO THE SISTERS OF ST. MICHAEL’S

I often wonder if my songs
Are heard behind your convent walls;
I sing my purest songs for you
When evening falls.

I often wonder if you missed
The lovely words I stole away;
You will recall the songs I sing;
You will, someday.
THE TRAVELLER

I asked the way of each faint sound
That split the darkness like cleft wood:
But nothing came of what I asked, no light
Would show me where it was I stood.

I cried, "You ones who know the way I go
Show me the road to what I seek;
But shapes that passed me in the black were still;
No soul that knew me there would speak.

The road was hard, the road was long of years
And where I was no one would say;
But when I saw the lights ahead I heard,
"This is the way, this is the way."

Then, is it very strange I chose my own
Blind path from where I travelled all alone?

POETRY

My feet go swiftly down the street
In time to words that dance and soar.
Oh, singing words that steal my breath,
Be mine, be mine for evermore.

It's cool beneath the trees
Where lilacs slow the breeze,
And I would stay with these;
But I must race the closing door.

Along the way my old friends stare
And clink the ice in their cold tea.
Beneath their summer hats the girls
Have eyes that soften when they see
The lilting words race by
With dreams their hearts deny.
While down the street race I
To catch the song that maddened me.
FAITH

Who is the one who wears my robes
Who speaks in my own tone,
And who knows less of hearts and souls
Than I my own?

Oh stranger with the once-known face,
'Though it be sharp and stark--
Which one of us will walk with light
Which one with dark?

No star is there to light my mind,
'Though God has let them fall;
Perhaps blind hearts are better than
No heart at all.

THE TEACHER

I do not ask to be the poet-flame
That turns the thoughts of night to day;
But let me go ahead the darkest years of years
To light the tapers on the way.
LAMENT FOR COLUMBINE

The ghostly steps still steal across the hall
Where once the tread of feet was light and fast
And graceful silhouettes upon the wall
By Columbine and Harlequin were cast
Oh, Columbine, how could a poor clown know
That somber echoes rise from dancing feet?
How strange that you will dance in falling snow
And in the weeping wind that sways the wheat!
I put away the flimsy things you wore,
Your dancing shoes and ribbons for your hair—
I put them by and then I locked the door
And wrote this sonnet sitting on the stair.
My lovely Columbine, you surely know
Your clown will miss your laughter so.

FOREBODING

I saw a hundred idle men
With wistful eyes in their gaunt faces;
I saw a hundred hungry men
Who watched one shovel take their places.
Oh, workmen sweat and workmen raise the pillars of their lands.
What glory will our nation build with men of withered hands?

You worshipper of cam and wheel,
A wrench can take your gods apart;
Since you are cast in their cold steel,
Let wheels replace your useless heart.
Oh, cranes can lift and robots tend the great and swift inventions;
But workmen pray and monsters thwart a Frankenstein's intentions.
RACE TRACK

In here the whim of fate, or gamblers' plan,
Can make the smallest bettor wolf or clown;
But in the end, no matter how they ran,
The bettors work, the owners take the town.
I know all this and still I lay my stake
On Pegasus who ran so well abroad.
While no one wants the horse, if he should wake,
And stop his listless pawing of the sod...
What odds to win! I know he has the heart,
The class, the speed; I know his record well.
They say he lets them down at every start;
But this is once the sleeper rings the bell.
As always in the stretch my glad heart sings—
What blooded field can beat a horse with wings?

I TELL YOU, TRUTH

Nowhere in any world is that blue bird
That bursts its too small throat in song for me.
Nowhere can joy yet burst the skies, be heard.
Nowhere was this before, nowhere can be.
Shall I then send my tears like spears up high
That lose their force and pin me fast to woe
On their return? I wish to dream no lies,
To make untrue the bitter truth I know...
I tell you, life, I ask no truce of woman's lips.
I tell you, scrapers in the sky of birds,
You are no foil against the worm that sips
In leisure all man's works. I fling my words
To bomb in splinters on the hard command
That happiness evade the reaching hand.
FRAIL WARRIOR

The trail I climb would surely break my heart
If your old blaze were washed away,
Were not above each turn to show that once
Frail flesh and blood had passed this way.

This is a trail too faint, a trail too steep
For men and yet I see your mark;
Yet you were slight and so ashamed to beg
A piece of candle in the dark.

So inch by inch I cut the mountain's height
And on your blaze renew the year.
Though few shall follow after to your peak,
To where I climb the trail is clear.

ELEGY

Let there be sorrow in the land of birds
And in their world let all song end.
For man who hoards above his share of grain
Is not a song bird's friend.

Let music cease and let the waiting worm
Work unmolested in the grain.
So fly away until they want
The song birds back again.

Someday a robot with his gears away
May hate his ordered world and say,
"I sometimes miss the good old days
Before man died away."
AS A FLOWER

Wild flowers of the woods, how can you give
Your faith to one who passes in despair?
How can you carpet land where men now live
With dread of hissing shells that taint the air?
This small, dear face of loveliness you wear
I went to shield from sudden death men know.
I spread my coat, but whispers fill the air.
"When heroes die, when tyrants turn to dust and blow,
And bombs and guns are flakes of rust, I still shall grow."

STREET SCENE

I think he was the meekest man I ever saw
And I followed him out of the clinic
To the street in the pushcart district.
His wife was waiting there cupping a flower in her hands
As tenderly as though it were his life.
"What did the doctors say?" she asked.
It's my heart," he said.
She drew in her breath and crushed the flower.
He looked at the faces in the street
And the bread struggle bruised his eyes.
If a man has got to have something wrong," he said
"It might as well be his heart."
MARK

I have been sure of only one thing in life:
That I have known sorrow well.

A few small fruit I tore
From the abundant trees:
But while my mouth was still stained
With the dye of the mulberries.
I knew that sorrow was waiting
To chain me to earth.
But to know a truth is to make a mask
To face it.
Would you then know
That I did not wish for my face?

COUNTRY WALKS

A land with many little mouths to feed
Of young who did not choose a hungry home.
A hand that never learned to close a purse
Once flung these walks of white cement beside
A street that did not know the shortest way
From town to town but wound from tree to brook
For feet that did not have a special place to go
But down a road that did not know its mind.
At night these quiet walks lie gleaming in
The dark like white foam boiling on the shore.
The light the moon projects upon the walks
Can mark the trees upon this silver screen
For lonely folk like me who nightly go
This way to watch the magic lantern show.
NEW ENGLAND APPLE TREE

What stubborn strain is there in you
To hold the winter through
These withered apples as you do?
Cold scimitars could not erase
Your fruit from its grim place
Against the rigid earth's bare face.
But when the spring leafs flags of hope
And blossoms still your fears,
You drop your ashen spears.

Some men believe the way you do
And fight a winter through
To make an ideal peace like you.

THE CIGARETTE GIRL

Her eyes and skin remind me of a rose
Beneath an air-conditioned case of glass.
I recognize the old-time perfect pose
She had at school, and do not let her pass.
“What brings you here?” she asks without surprise,
As though she saw me just the other night;
But I can see the lie in her wide eyes
And in the way the roses turn to white.
“You had a voice; you used to want to sing,”
I say and see too late the hard words break
The brittle glass and reach the fragile thing
That grew so sweetly for illusion's sake.
She said, “Are you a famous poet yet?
Are you -- or what do you do to forget?”
MICHAEL WEIR, MARKSMAN

At last when trees let copper pennies fall
And coins of gold to weave a cloth to dress
The threadbare earth, he feels his bareness,
His need for food and takes his gun to go
Out where he saw the tracks of stag and doe.
"It's now for game," I hear him call
"If poor folk eat at all."

I watch this old man walk across the bog
And marvel that his feet still know so well
The safest way from mound to mound, can tell
His mind the times he passed this way before,
Can make a tussocked marsh a kitchen floor,
Can pass so silently the frog
Still sits the mossy log.

I know my friend can bring a feather down
With one shot farther than my eyes can see.
And if he raised his gun I would not be
A deer. At dusk he comes across the bog
Without a kill, as guilty as a dog.
"My eyes are gone," he says, looks down;
"There's victuals on the town."

I watch him come and go this way each year,
A little older in his sham pursuit to kill . . .
He never shot for game and never will . . .
I think that if he asked the woods for meat
The small wild things would follow at his feet.
The woods can live without much fear
Of aged Michael Weir.

ARABIAN PROVERB

Oh, wise is he who wears his rags with grace!
I walked ashamed upon the street
And wept because I had no shoes, until
I met a man who had no feet.
PROFLIGATE

My thoughts were prodigal as autumn leaves:
But it was spring, and summer saw
Me standing barren while the fruitful trees
Were miracles that kept the law.

INVENTORY

Almost too many things about a man are known:
How long a man will live and what will steal his breath;
How much his two strong hands are worth to industry;
How much it costs in war to bring about his death.

Oh yes, we know the questions and the answers too.
And with precision catalogue beyond a guess
Each fact about a man who lives, except, of course,
The hunger in his heart for love and happiness.
GOODBYE

One moment as I pause upon this last farewell
Before I close the door
And fold the windowed coins within the purse of thought
To store against the day of need,
Let me say it once more.

THE THIRTY-NINERS

The car was shining with your hair's sleek lights
The day the Boston salesman closed the deal
For six dollars worth of hoarded mites
And anxiously we sat behind the wheel.
With pleasure once a rich man lightly spent
For this more money than we ever saw.
The careful craftsmen shaped and turned and bent
A thing alive with slight if any flaw.
Then later on the frantic westward race,
With worried dog and all we would not sell,
I watched with sleepless eyes your white, tense face
And blessed the grimy hands that worked so well.
And smoothly purred the ancient Cadillac
Across the desert of no coming back.
MODERN PIONEERS

The motor purred, "Close, close your eyes and sleep;"
The road said, "See how straight I go," and wove
Like velvet in the wind. He could not keep
His eyes awake and it was he who drove,
Who held another's life within a single turn
Of that live wheel, and so he bit his lip
Until he felt the warm blood run and burn,
And now the wheel was held with safer grip.
Ahead a white sign flashed before his light.
A slight, dark figure stirred and softly said,
"Now we can sleep on western soil tonight."
Thus slept the two who could not buy a bed.
The sign lied when it read The Great Divide,
For they were sweetly sleeping side by side.

THREE CINQUAINXS

PORTRAIT

His eyes
With a sweeping glance
Coolly measured her soul
And with a careless shrug entombed
Her youth.

STARS

The stars
Are mother eyes.
Often they shine with mirth;
Sometimes they blink, they close, and then
Rain falls.

WIND

The wind
With stifled moan,
Like youthful Juliet,
Rises from sleep, calls out in vain,
And dies.
That Haunted Place
PERSISTENCE

The song of the water in the brook
Has worn the stones smooth.
The constant sun has done a trick with mirrors
And silver polish on the eternal moon and stars.
The wind makes green taffeta pines shiver
And sing the song it wills.
The world is made to waltz to a given rhythm
On an imaginary axis.

Then is it too much to ask
That one of the songs I send to you
Should one day beat with your heart?

FUGITIVE

Run, lovely fugitive
Who should have been a doe,
Afraid and streaking through
The silver snow.

Escape the foolish town
And all the snares of men;
That your great wounded eyes
May live again.

And when men drop the chase
I know where you will be;
But fear your own wild heart
Much more than me.
PURPOSE

In this great scientific age when man
Builds winged planes that shame the albatross
And spinning hawk, when engineers can span
A cataract a Leuncelot could not cross
I shaped my little fragments one by one
That they might touch your hand when they were done.

Thus, one by one these fragments met my gaze
As slowly as a cavern’s crystals grow,
And though I ply an art of olden days
When men wrought less in their slow age, I know
I shall not care that others’ great works stand
So proudly if my own are in your hand.

HELP WANTED

I need someone to share my life;
To be my pal, my cook, and wife;
To darn my socks and find my hat;
To clean my desk and feed my cat;
To hum a tender lullaby;
To burn the toast and have a cry;
To run her fingers through my hair;
To be, in short, my light, my air.

I searched about the market-place
And found a childish, lovely face.
She must be sweet — I saw her wear
A ribbon in her longish hair.
I hardly know just where to start
To try to win this maiden’s heart.
There must be some romantic way —
Some song to sing or words to say?
THE HOUSE

This is a home a woman made with love,
A house against the fever of the world,
A house to fit her mind the way a glove
Would fit her hand. This is a kitten curled
And sleeping silently with perfect faith
That no one but the priestess of these halls
Will pass on silent sandals like a wraith
Of all the dreams she stores within her halls.
I bring the dust of roads to each bright floor
And leave about the place a man's rough blaze
That writes no room will be the way it was before,
That tells no man will know a woman's ways.
Sometimes I stop my walking with a start
To know I walk upon a woman's heart.

THE PRINTER OF POEMS

To sing eternally a poet's songs
Are set by ink-stained fingers like my own
That move in rhythm to a heart that longs
To have the sacrament it has not known.
While all the founts of loveliness lie still
Within the fonts of type I know so well,
My eager hand must serve another's will
And sing the song the poet's letters spell.
But always after this the presses start
To sing for sheerest joy and ask above
The rebel voice within my workman's heart,
"But who is it receives your dear one's love?"
And as my flying fingers feed the press
It sings of her and all her loveliness.
CONFESSION

With all the faces in the world
Alike as daisies in a field
And all the years of thoughts that crowd
A memory to make it yield,
How strange, at last, that I should this way note
Your face can cause my heart to leap my throat.

BRAVADO

I leave the sights and sounds of town,
I leave my love today.
No man can chain these dancing feet,
Or woman bid them stay.
At last there comes an end to grief;
There falls in time the final leaf
From each gaunt tree. Since love was brief
Today I go away.

I fly the man that was myself;
I take the nomad’s pack.
To drown the color of your eyes
I pluck the deep lilac.
Then, with the smile of a circus clown
I leave the place, I quit the town
And chant that London bridge is down,
Lest you should breathe, “Come back.”
AS OF ALL THINGS

Then singing let us walk to where we loved
And spread sweet incense on those years
That later we may, alone,
“How sweet they were, those years.”

Then chanting let us walk to where we saw
The startled fox unsure to see
Such certainty of two wild hearts
Glad in futility.

So, with slow words of death, then let us turn
And slay the only love I know;
But down the lonely path of time
You too shall weep and go.

LETTER TO A GIRL

My heart is as cold as the sound a wagon makes
Running its steel wheels in an icy rut;
My lips are as tight as a rusted lock.
Yes, I am hard; yes, I am bitter;
Let me lie on a slatted bench for a bed,
Let me sleep with a wooden pillow.
Oh, girl with the silk for hair, let me be this,
For perhaps a word from your remembered lips
Curled about a lucky syllable
And I shall forget the truth I have
With malnutritioned truth.
MAN ALONE

If I can rise from where one place is set,
If I can light a cigarette,
Or feel the silk inside the cedar chest,
Or touch the worn place on the floor
Or call someone upon the telephone,
Or hear a song not heard before,
Then I am just a man sick for a face
And not a ghost about a haunted place.
ATQUE VALE

Goodbye to health,
A shining penny spent.
I never knew its worth until
It went.

SILENT SONG

God gave me song that does not sing,
Mute song of weak men dying;
He gave me that which could not bring
Surcease to faint souls crying.

What love have men of silent song,
And hush of white stars falling;
What ears are given to the strong
To hear a soft voice calling?
THE ENEMY

For once let us square off and catch our breath.
We two who fought for years away like this.
I know your subtle little tricks, white death,
Your soothing words, your narcotic kiss.
The fevered boys with rose-stained cheeks I knew
Who put away their playing things to wait
You in a darkened room where candles threw
Dark blossoms on a wall, these taught me hate.
I was a boy like that who lived in dread.
Each day each night, of footsteps in the hall,
Until one day a flower drew me out of bed.
A path lured me beyond the nurse’s call.
And though you always win when war is done,
I claim each lovely thing a battle won.

TO A STUDENT NURSE

Maintain the dream
That lives in your clear eyes;
There is no breeze or meadowland
When that light dies.

Give all to dreams
For dreams alone are real
And angels paint the eastern sky
When dreamers kneel.
TWO NURSES

I

This buxom lass was at my side
When I came out of ether.
Her face was a whirling white flower
I could not see very well;
But where I had just come from
There was darkness and death.
"You angel," I whispered from the heart.
"On the farm," the face said,
"They never say that to a girl."
When the toxins left my eyes
I watched the freckles spread like stars
Across the milky way of her round face,
And in the days that passed somehow
I watched the hands that pitched hay
Make me want to live again.
The day I left the hospital assembly line
She said, "Isn't it funny what a man says
When he's so sick he doesn't know better?"
I remembered all the foolish things that I had said
About the standing of the Boston baseball teams,
About the super-synthetic beauty of a glamour girl,
About a lot of things when I knew
What I was saying.
Yes, it is funny," I said.

II

Her face is lovely with a delicate fragility
That is just a trifle set,
With rigid little marks about the eyes
Recalling the classic lines,
"Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness."
She does not speak as she goes by
But drifts a slow tired smile on the wake
Of her going through the ethered air.
She starts to feed an old man whose eyes
Are lost in darkness.
She is a mother bird feeding her young
Patiently, tenderly.
And now I see that she is a slender girl
With tired little lines about her eyes.
BEWILDERMENT

I cannot say for sure that you are real;
Too many times before you stole away
Into the night. If I should dream or kneel
I cannot say.

A nurse must always be where shadows play
Strange tricks within a lighted room and steal
Your mind. I wish you would be real someday.

This hand upon my pulse is good to feel;
But many times before you stole away,
And whether your clear eyes are truly real
I cannot say.

INSPIRATION

Child, mother and driver of hayrakes,
Ten year old driver of hayrakes,
Daughter of Canadian raconteurs,
Fille de Azarie, le raconteur,
Singer of songs of voyageurs,
Where are the echoes of your songs,
My sturdy little mother?
The songs you sang to me,
Lilting songs of early springs and racing streams
Roaring at my father, Pierre, who rode the logs
And small boys who tease their little sisters.
It is strange I do not see the northern rivers,
The lakes and forests of your songs;
But see only the wistful girl of the hayrake,
And the naive little mother who comes to the hospital
With word of carnations doing well on the window sill
And the first few blades of green grass
On the South Common.
COMPENSATION

Perhaps in mercy God was moved to speak
The day I wept to face the world in birth.
"Because this one is born so poor and weak,
Will all his days be victim of man's mirth,
Be cold, be hungry days on end, be lone
Against death's vultures in his cloudy sky,
Be loveless as a jagged mountain stone,
Be less afraid to live than fall and die;
Because this one shall have so little grace,
Shall never own the sunny heart of youth,
Shall wander with a lost and lonely face,
And never see the proof of what he holds as truth,
Then he shall have to comfort him along
His errant way, a little burst of song."

NIGHT WATCH

The rain is crying tears I cannot keep
From making brooks along my upturned face.
My friend, the rain, must know that I should weep
To earn the right to see your stricken grace.
From here I see the careful shadows pass
And bend above your pillowed head and I
Who love you stand behind the window glass
Like someone watching Sleeping Beauty lie.
But you will rise and give my barren land
The breath of flowers back, its life once more,
And then, perhaps hold out your little hand
That all might be the way it was before.
Perhaps, dear God, you'll make it come out right
To please a ragged watcher in the night?
THE DREAM

My homesick ships with plaintive cry
Of dreams that will not hush or die,
My mast-lashed wings so drawn and pale,
One day we sail.

TO A DITCH DIGGER

"The upper crust!" you sneered,
Then swung your pick aloft and down
And split the frozen earth like some poor head
That wears a crown.

"Aristocrat!" you spat,
And red blood stained your olive face.
I sighed -- once I was well and strong like you --
And left the place.

You stopped at five o'clock
And supped on wine and wholesome meat.
While you were warm and fast asleep, my friend,
I walked the street.